



The HCN Guide to better Phone Calling over Broadband

The way people make home and business phone calls is changing, and in the next few years BT / Openreach will completely switch off its legacy analogue copper phone system and move everyone to voice (and video) calling over broadband. This is starting this year and the will be complete by 2025.

As an HCN customer, you can take advantage of your superior gigabit capable broadband service for making and receiving calls right now. The choices are yours, but the rewards — in terms of better quality calls and much lower (or zero) prices — are substantial.

First, a little background to put the situation in context.

- Over the last five years, the number of conventional phone lines has remained essentially constant at 30 million lines, whereas the volume of calls placed from landlines has reduced by nearly 50%, from 82 billion minutes to 44 billion minutes
- Over the same period, mobile telephony customers have also been essentially constant at around 80 million subscribers, but the number of minutes of calling has increased by around 16% (from 138 billion minutes to 160 billion minutes)
- The above figures need to be put in context in that a great many 'phone' calls from mobiles are now placed using applications such as WhatsApp, Skype, FaceTime etc, so the mobile figures given above (which represent solely outgoing minutes made conventionally) understate the significant change in user behaviour
- Given the population of the UK is currently circa 65m people, 2.2 people share a landline connection making an average of 680 minutes of calls each per year (or a little under one hour per month)
- Each person in the UK now has 1.25 mobile phones and makes 2,460 minutes of calls per year, equivalent to 200 minutes a month
- The devices for making phone (and video) calls are rapidly increasing. For the smart speaker market (Amazon Alexa etc), the latest mid 2019 figures indicate that over 10 million people in the UK now have one or more smart speakers. One of the attractions is that calls from such a device to UK and US mobile and landlines are without charge

Additionally, making and receiving calls over digital connections allows a far greater degree of personalisation and features than is the case with the old analogue landline calls. We are all very familiar with these when using our mobiles as such capabilities have been progressively introduced in 3G and 4G mobile services, which are 100% digital.

Making calls over broadband is really as simple and straightforward as making a mobile phone call, but unfortunately the market has developed using technological names like VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) and so on, which serve to confuse rather than explain. Our task in this paper is to make it all much simpler and explain what can be done in layman's language. The only key thing to remember is that the quality of your calls can and will be much improved if implemented properly, and the costs will drastically reduce (and may even be zero).

Phone numbers

Landline phone numbers of old were constructed of two elements — a geographic identifier such as 01432 which identified the local analogue phone exchange and a local number on that exchange. Given that all such local exchanges will be decommissioned over the next 4 to 5 years, the numbers will not have such relevance in the future, yet many (particularly older) customers still feel an allegiance toward them. This is unlike younger and predominantly mobile phone users who do not see any benefit in geographical identification, but much rather prefer a mobile number which can be theirs for life, irrespective of where they may be. And anyway, with their caller display and memory storage systems, many such users do not remember any phone numbers themselves, as the mobile device remembers them itself and identifies callers by name rather than number.

An important thing to remember though is that 'your' landline number doesn't belong to you — it actually is the property of your landline supplier. And, again unlike the mobile industry, porting a number between carriers is laborious, costly (typically £20 - £50 one off) and potentially error prone. There are industry attempts to simplify the porting of landline numbers which has been a problem for several years, but as yet there is no simple way to achieve this.

Lastly, we need to recognise the preponderance of unsolicited phone calls directed to conventional landline numbers. One of the benefits that people report about getting a new digital landline number is that they get almost zero unsolicited marketing and phishing calls.

Devices for making and receiving digital landline calls

To make and receive conventional landline calls you need an analogue handset. These can be directly connected to the incoming copper phone line, or can be portable handsets connected to an analogue base station. If you are emotionally bound to your current phones and don't want to consign them to the waste bin or local museum, then you can — all you need is an analogue to digital converter (an ATA). These cost around £30 to purchase, but many phone service providers such as Vonage will supply them to contract customers free of charge. You are however always going to be restricted to the types of service features that are supported on analogue phones.

If you currently have any smartphone, this can be used to make and receive calls over the digital broadband network — and these can be quite separate from standard mobile calls with different ringtones if you wish. Basically all the advanced features of digital calling such as caller display, time of day routing, automatic blocking of unwanted calls, conference calling etc are available to you — as of course are video calls.

Thirdly, you can purchase a desk based digital phone (called a VOIP phone) which gives you all the digital features and quality but retaining the conventional landline 'feel'. Such devices start at around £30, but more features such as video calling or portability will increase the price.

Fourthly you can of course use your computer or laptop for calling, as people have been doing for many years, with Skype being the most popular service.

Lastly, as mentioned before, smart speakers (and their video brethren) are increasingly being used for all forms of 'landline' calling but without the need for remembering numbers and using anything other than your voice.

Costs of phone calling

This of course is a huge subject and many comparison sites exist on the internet in order to assist you in getting the best deal. There is no 'one size fits all'. It is important to look at your whole communication spend when making comparisons — mobile and landline call prices outbound as well as the costs incurred by people calling you. But you also need to know the good news that, unlike conventional landline and mobile calls, there is no HCN additional fixed monthly or annual cost for the line rental.

Customer Types

To avoid too much non-essential complexity, we have divided our suggestions into three customer types:

1. Customers who primarily use their mobile phone for calling
2. Customers who have traditionally used landline phones, and wish to retain that usage
3. Customers with special needs — multi-line business accounts, use of analogue alarm services, special services for the hard of hearing or visually impaired etc

Customers who primarily use their mobile phone for calling

Increasingly mobile phone service providers are moving to business models which allow for unlimited outbound calling and unlimited texts. Such services are available from all mobile phone network operators and from resellers such as Tesco mobile and Giffgaff. Currently the best deals available for such calling plans appear to be from Giffgaff who charge just £6 per month inclusive of unlimited calls and text, together with a limited data allowance for use when you are not at home.

There are two issues you need to bear in mind — as well as price. Firstly your choice of underlying carrier (EE, O2, Three and Vodafone) will in many areas be decided by the quality of signal you can receive. You can check this out in advance using the OFCOM broadband and mobile phone checker at <https://checker.ofcom.org.uk/>.

If your signal strength from the mast is low (one or two bars) in your house, then that's not necessarily a problem as an HCN broadband customer. Simply use wi-fi calling, where the call is routed over your wifi with complete clarity. All the four mobile phone providers have such services,. Or you can download an app such as Bria Solo (free version) or GS Wave (also free).

The benefit of the app approach is that it will allow you to make and receive calls on a 'landline' number. There is still a not unjustifiable view from people making calls on conventional landlines that calls to mobiles are extremely expensive. By using an app such as the ones mentioned they will be able to make the call within any landline package they may have, and will not know that you are answering the call on a mobile phone.

To establish such a service, you will need to subscribe to a VOIP provider — see the final section of this paper. There are a wide range of suppliers and many of them provide a simple Pay As You Go facility, meaning that you have no fixed monthly charges but simply have the calls deducted from a preset amount.

Remember too that there are no additional charges from HCN — feel free to have as many landlines as you want, one for each person in the house if you wish, meaning that you will never have to act as a telephone receptionist at home!

Customers who have traditionally used landline phones, and wish to retain that usage

No problem, but you are faced with a choice of what device do you want to use for landline phones and which service provider and what call package is applicable for you.

We have already outlined the choices in device type: analogue phone, VOIP phone, mobile smartphone and/or smart speakers. The choice is really a matter of personal preference: you will be faced with a one off cost of £30+ whichever you choose (unless an ATA is bundled into your contract price).

In terms of service provider, there are many in the UK market but we have personal experience with a number of them: Sipgate, Port 5060, Yay, Draytel and Vonage. They are described in the last page of this document. A number of them offer 'unlimited' calling plans for a fixed monthly fee, but you should carefully investigate your calling patterns (including on your mobile) to see if they are offering value.

Customers who still wish for an ‘unlimited call’ package

We have evaluated and tested a number of alternatives from the supplier list.

Vonage’s service called Talk UK offers unlimited calls to UK geographic landlines for £10.25 per month, with calls to UK mobiles costing 19p setup plus 10p per minute. As an alternative they offer an unlimited package to all UK landlines and mobile numbers for £16 per month.

Sipgate offer an unlimited package to both UK landlines and mobiles for £9.95, a considerable saving. Lesser priced packages are available for lower volume users — see their website for details.

Port 5060 have a fixed monthly charge of £3.60 per month, with additional costs for each call made — 0.6p per minute for landlines, 1.45p per minute for mobiles.

You will need to pay a one off charge if you wish to port your current number — Sipgate charges £30 for this, Port 5060 charges £18.

Customers with special requirements

These could include such things as business calls with multiple extensions, people with existing analogue alarm services, special services for the hard of hearing or visually impaired etc.

As a general point we wish to highlight that all services for those with disabilities or those who may require emergency service calling in all circumstances should seek specialist advice and also install power back up equipment on their phone and broadband equipment (called a UPS, an uninterruptible power supply). Such users should also ensure that they register their location with the VOIP service provider and also have a mobile phone available as an alternate. We will happily give advice to any of our customers who find themselves in this situation — and, of course, our partner Wansdyke has a special service for the over-75s without charge.

It is important always to remember that your phone is a lifeline in emergency situations, and you must ensure that all in your household know how to contact the emergency services in all situations. Also that the change away from legacy copper phone lines to digital services is a pathway which will affect all users in the coming years as old exchanges and copper facilities are withdrawn from service.

For business calls with multiple lines, this is a specialist area and — unless you are savvy about conventional PABXs and their cloud based alternatives — you are well advised to seek professional help who will survey your needs and recommend the best solution. In the first instance we suggest contacting Ravi Tester of Technical Care Services, Hereford — phone 07969 134226.

It should also be mentioned that there are many more VOIP providers who are increasingly specialising in the business call market, so the choices available are much more numerous than for residential services.

Choosing your mobile service provider

There are many comparison sites on the internet for determining the ‘best’ deal on mobile phone service. We recommend that you compare them on their SIM only deals, as the price of calls with a ‘bundled’ handset can make the comparison complex.

Comparison sites available include:

<https://mobile-phones.confused.com/>,
<https://www.moneysupermarket.com/mobile-phones/>,
<https://www.uswitch.com/mobiles/>, and
<https://www.comparethemarket.com/mobile-phones/>.

Some VOIP suppliers and their pricing packages for a 'benchmark' residential customer

The table on the following page gives an indication of the VOIP providers we have experienced and their current (February 2020) pricing for our 'benchmark' user — i.e. one who uses the OFCOM national average of 57 minutes of outbound calling per month to landline numbers. Clearly only you can determine how 'average' your household is, and then find the best deal for you.

VOIP Supplier	Website Link	Cost of 57 mins of UK landline calls per month	Contract	Cost of unlimited UK landline calls per month	Contract
Draytel	https://www.draytel.org/	£0.80	PAYG	N/A	N/A
Sipgate	https://www.sipgatebasic.co.uk/	£0.67	PAYG	£9.95	1 mon
Port 5060	https://www.port5060.net/	£3.60 per month plus £0.34	1 mon	N/A	N/A
Vonage	https://www.vonage.co.uk/home/	£10.25	1 mon	£10.25	1 mon
Yay	https://www.yay.com/	£5.99 per month (100 mins included)	1 mon	N/A	N/A

Prices above are as advertised on the respective websites as of 01 February 2020.